Stilicho

(c. 359 – 22 August 408)

BRIEFING

Stilicho (/ˈstɪlɪkoʊ/; c. 359 – 22 August 408) was a military commander in the Roman army who, for a time, became the most powerful man in the Western Roman Empire. He was partly of Vandal origins and married to Serena, the niece of emperor Theodosius I. He became guardian for the underage Honorius. After years of struggle against barbarian and Roman enemies, political and military disasters finally allowed his enemies in the court of Honorius to remove him from power. His fall culminated in his arrest and execution in 408.

ORIGINS AND RISE TO POWER

Besides the relevant legal records in the Codex Theodosianus, the major primary source for the events of Stilicho's reign, or at least events prior to 404, are the panegyrics addressed to him by the poet Claudian, whom he patronized after the death of Theodosius I. These are likely quite biased and portray Stilicho in a positive light. For events after 404, Zosimus is the main source; he derived his information on Stilicho from two prior historians, whose texts he copies faithfully, although in summary. One of these historians, Eunapius, was hostile to Stilicho, and the other, Olympiodorus, was supportive, resulting in a bit of a garbled, contradictory account. Stilicho also maintained correspondence with his friend, the renowned pagan senator Symmachus.

Stilicho was the son of a Vandal cavalry officer and a provincial woman of Roman birth. Despite his father's origins, there is little to suggest that Stilicho considered himself anything other than a Roman, and his high rank within the empire suggests that he was probably not an Arian like many Germanic Christians but rather a Nicene Christian like his patron Theodosius I, who declared Nicene Christianity the official religion of the empire.

Stilicho joined the Roman army and rose through the ranks during the reign of Theodosius I, who ruled the Eastern half of the Roman Empire from Constantinople, and who was to become the last emperor to rule both the eastern and western halves of the empire jointly. In 383, Theodosius sent him as a tribunus praetorianus, an office in the branch of military administrators known as the notarii, on an embassy mission to the court of the Persian King Shapur III in Ctesiphon to negotiate a peace settlement relating to the partition of Armenia. Historians have a difficult time explaining exactly what led to his marriage to Serena which occurred after his return to Constantinople at the successful conclusion of peace talks. Claudian claims that Theodosius awarded Stilicho with Serena’s hand because of his outstanding achievements, but as Stilicho was actually just a junior member of the embassy and not its leader, nor had he done anything else of note, this is certainly panegyrical publicity. Perhaps the varied duties of the notarii at some point placed Stilicho inside the imperial residence of Constantinople where he encountered Serena and they decided the match themselves, or maybe Theodosius saw a good outcome in tying a young, up-and-coming, half-barbarian general to the imperial household. The marriage would see the birth of a son, who was named Eucherius, and two daughters, Maria and Thermantia.

Whatever its origin, this match undoubtedly raised Stilicho's prospects. He was promoted to comes sacri stabuli and soon after to comes domesticorum in 385. It is unclear whether he participated in the campaign against Magnus Maximus or remained in Constantinople during that time. In 392 or 393, Theodosius promoted Stilicho to comes et magister utriusque militiae and gave him command of soldiers in Thrace.

After the death of the Western emperor Valentinian II in 392, Theodosius appointed Stilicho as co-commander of the army with Timasius. They were victorious over the Western army at the Battle of the Frigidus. One of his comrades during the campaign was the Visigothic warlord Alaric, who commanded a substantial number of Gothic auxiliaries. Alaric would go on to become Stilicho's chief adversary during his later career as the head of the Western Roman armies. Stilicho distinguished himself at the Frigidus, and Theodosius, exhausted by the campaign, saw him as a man worthy of responsibility for the future safety of the empire. In several of the Claudian poems celebrating Theodosius's victories, Stilicho's participation and contribution to the campaign were highlighted. This helped him gain popularity in the empire. The last emperor of a united Rome appointed Stilicho guardian of his son Honorius, with the rank of comes et magister utriusque militiae praesentalis (supreme commander), shortly before his death in 395.

The Battle of the Frigidus

The Battle of the Frigidus, also called the Battle of the Frigid River, was fought on 5 and 6 September 394 between the armies of the Roman emperor Theodosius the Great and the rebel *augustus* Eugenius (r. 392–394), in the eastern border of Roman Italy. Theodosius won the battle and defeated the usurpation of Eugenius and Arbogast, restoring unity to the Roman Empire. The battlefield, in the *Claustra Alpium Iuliarum* near the Julian Alps through which Theodosius's army had passed, was probably in the Vipava Valley – with the Frigidus River being the modern Vipava – or possibly in the valley of the Soča.

Timasius, the *magister militum*, commanded the Theodosian army with help from the *magister utriusque militiae* Stilicho. Arbogast, previously the *magister militum* under Theodosius's brother-in-law and senior co-emperor Valentinian II (r. 375–392), commanded Eugenius's forces. It was Arbogast who had engineered Eugenius's acclamation after Valentinian's mysterious death. With reinforcements from Theodosius's allies among the Goths led by Alaric and Gainas, and from Bacurius the Iberian, Theodosius's army defeated Eugenius's, and Eugenius was captured and executed. Arbogast killed himself after the battle. The fighting ended the third civil war of Theodosius's reign, after the two fought against Magnus Maximus (r. 383–388).

In ecclesiastical history, the battle was remembered as the last to involve an *augustus* who was a devotee of Roman paganism, though in fact Eugenius was not a pagan. The posthumous accusation of paganism was first levelled by Tyrannius Rufinus to enhance the reputation of Theodosius I, who was a vigorous promoter of Nicene Christianity and the state church of the Roman Empire. Church histories attributed Theodosius's victory at the Frigidus to divine intervention, and Rufinus equated its importance with the Battle of the Milvian Bridge won by Constantine the Great over Maxentius in 312.

On 15 May 392, the western emperor, Valentinian II, was found dead at his residence in Vienne, Gaul. His *magister militum*, Arbogast, informed Theodosius, the eastern emperor and Valentinian's brother-in-law, that the young emperor had committed suicide. Tensions between the two-halves of the empire were heightened further that summer. Arbogast made several attempts to contact Theodosius, but apparently none got further than the ears of the Eastern praetorian prefect, or chief minister, Rufinus. The responses that Arbogast received from Rufinus were unhelpful. Theodosius himself was slowly coming to the belief that Valentinian had been murdered, in no small part because his wife Galla was convinced her brother's death was caused by treachery. For his part, Arbogast had few friends in the Eastern court, although his uncle Richomeres was chief commander of the eastern cavalry. As it appeared increasingly likely that whatever course Theodosius decided upon would be hostile towards Arbogast, the Frank decided to make the first move.

On 22 August, Arbogast elevated Eugenius, the Western imperial court's *magister scrinii*, or senior civil servant, to the throne of the Western Empire. Eugenius was a well-respected scholar of rhetoric, and a native Roman, making him a far more acceptable candidate for the purple than the Frankish commander. His accession was backed by the praetorian prefect of Italy, Nicomachus Flavianus. Some senators, notably Symmachus, were uneasy with this action. In addition there was the issue of Valentinian's death, which had never been resolved to his satisfaction. Furthermore, Eugenius had removed most of the high civil officers left by Theodosius when he had given the Western half of the empire to Valentinian, so that Theodosius had lost control of the Western Roman Empire. When a party of Western ambassadors arrived in Constantinople to request that Eugenius be acknowledged as the Western *augustus*, Theodosius was noncommittal, even if he received them with presents and vague promises. Whether he had already decided on an offensive against Eugenius and Arbogast at this point is unclear. In the end, however, after declaring his son Honorius, then eight years old, as the western *augustus* in January of 393, Theodosius finally resolved to invade the West.

Over the following year and a half Theodosius marshalled his forces for the invasion. The Eastern armies had atrophied since the death of the Emperor Valens and most of his soldiers at the Battle of Adrianople. It fell upon the generals Flavius Stilicho and Timasius both to restore discipline to the legions and to bring them back up to strength through recruitment and conscription.

At the same time another of Theodosius's advisers, the eunuch Eutropius, was sent out from Constantinople to seek the advice and wisdom of an aged Christian monk in the Egyptian town of Lycopolis. According to the accounts of the meeting given by Claudian and Sozomen, the old monk prophesied that Theodosius would achieve a costly but decisive victory over Eugenius and Arbogast.

The Eastern army set out towards the west from Constantinople in May 394. The re-galvanized legions were bolstered by numerous barbarian auxiliaries including over 20,000 Visigoth federates and additional forces from Syria. Theodosius himself led the army; among his commanders were his own generals Stilicho and Timasius, the Visigoth chieftain Alaric, and a Caucasian Iberian named Bacurios Hiberios.

Their advance through Pannonia until the Julian Alps was unopposed, and Theodosius and his officers must have had suspicions about what lay ahead when they discovered that the eastern ends of the mountain passes were undefended. Arbogast had, based on his experiences fighting against the usurper Magnus Maximus in Gaul, decided that the best strategy was to keep his forces united to defend Italy itself, and to that end he went so far as to leave the Alpine passes unguarded. Arbogast's forces consisted mainly of his fellow Franks, Alemanni, and Gallo-Romans, plus his own Gothic auxiliaries.

Thanks to Arbogast's strategy of maintaining a single, relatively cohesive force, the Theodosian army passed unhindered through the Alps and descended towards the valley of the Frigidus River to the east of the Roman port of Aquileia. It was in this narrow, mountainous region that they came upon the Western army's encampment within the Claustra Alpium Iuliarum in the first days of September.

It is uncertain exactly where the battle took place. Though it has been claimed that the location of the battle should be sought in the Upper Soča Valley, it has mostly been placed somewhere in the Vipava Valley. Whereas the "Frigidus" has been usually considered to be the Vipava river or Hubelj creek and the battle to take place near Vrhpolje, recent research suggests that it actually took place some kilometers away, between Col and Sanabor in the so called *Door to Roman Italia*.

Before the battle, Eugenius and Arbogast placed a statue of Jupiter on the edge of the battlefield, and had applied images of Hercules on the army banners. This way they hoped to repeat the victories of Rome in earlier days, when it had always relied on the old gods for support in battle. On the first day of battle the old gods seemed to be winning. Theodosius attacked almost immediately, having undertaken little to no prior reconnaissance of the field of battle. He committed his Gothic allies to action first, perhaps hoping to thin their ranks through attrition and lessen their potential threat to the Empire. The Eastern army's headlong attack resulted in heavy casualties but little gain: 10,000 of the Gothic auxiliaries are reported to have been slain, and the Georgian general Bacurius was among the dead.

Day's end saw Eugenius celebrating his troops' successful defense of their position while Arbogast sent out detachments to close off the mountain passes behind Theodosius's forces.

After a sleepless night, Theodosius was cheered by the news that the men Arbogast had sent to bottle him up in the valley intended to desert to his side. Buoyed by this favorable development, Theodosius' men attacked once again. This time nature was on their side as a fierce tempest—apparently the bora, a regular occurrence in the region—blew along the valley from the east. Other stories tell of Theodosius praying to God for a storm, which God subsequently granted.

The high winds blew clouds of dust into the faces of the Western troops (legend also says that the fierce winds even blew the Western troops' own arrows back at them). Buffeted by the winds, Arbogast's lines broke and Theodosius gained the decisive victory that the Egyptian monk had prophesied.

In the aftermath, Eugenius was captured and brought before the emperor. His pleas for mercy went unanswered and he was beheaded. Arbogast escaped the defeat and fled into the mountains, but after a few days' wandering, he concluded escape was impossible and committed suicide.

While the version of the battle in which a divine wind defeated the pagan enemies of Theodosius became popular in late antiquity, modern historians, most notably Alan Cameron, have disputed the reliability of this version of events. Cameron asserts that the idea that Eugenius and Arbogastes were pagans or supporters of pagans was created to justify Theodosius' campaign against them, and that other usurpers, such as Magnentius, were falsely branded as pagans after their defeat. The idea that Theodosius' enemies were pagans originates in the church historian Rufinus, and only the sources dependent on Rufinus mention this idea.

In addition, the earliest source to mention the decisive bora wind was Ambrose of Milan, but he states in his sermon on Psalm 36 that the wind blew before that battle, and demoralized Theodosius' enemy before any fighting began. This idea was probably picked up by the poet Claudian, who, in his fanciful and propagandistic poetry for the Theodosian family, moved the wind to the decisive moment of the battle. Claudian seems to have been making a classicizing allusion to Silius Italicus, whose account of the Battle of Cannae mentioned a similar wind blowing spears and weapons back. From Claudian's poetry, which was popular in both eastern and western halves of the Roman Empire, the idea of the bora wind deciding the battle spread. It fit well with the other idea that the battle was one between pagans and Christians: Theodosius, as the Christian emperor, was aided by God in the form of the wind.

Historian Michele Renee Salzman explains that "two newly relevant texts — John Chrysoston's Homily 6, *adversus Catharos* (PG 63: 491-92) and the *Consultationes Zacchei et Apollonii*, re-dated to the 390s, reinforce the view that religion was not the key ideological element in the events at the time". According to Maijastina Kahlos, Finnish historian and Docent of Latin language and Roman literature at the University of Helsinki, the notion of pagan aristocrats united in a "heroic and cultured resistance" who rose up against the ruthless advance of Christianity in a final battle near Frigidus in 394, is a romantic myth.

It had been a costly victory for Theodosius and a total loss for Eugenius. A contemporary Roman historian stated that since the Goths suffered the bulk of the casualties, Theodosius won two battles at Frigidus, one against Eugenius and the other against the Goths. A mere four months later he died, leaving the government in the hands of his young children Honorius and Arcadius.

However, the battle also accelerated the collapse of the Roman army in the west. The losses at the Battle of the Frigidus weakened the western legions. This downturn in the capabilities of the Roman soldiers meant an increasing reliance by the Empire on barbarian mercenaries employed as *foederati*, who often proved to be unreliable, or even treacherous.

Ascension of Honorius

At the time of Theodosius's death, the field armies that had clashed at the Frigidus were still in disarray and fighting was still continuing. Claudian, Stilicho's panegyrist, makes Theodosius's spirit say "When I was raised to heaven disorder... and tumult did I leave behind me. The army was still drawing the forbidden sword in that Alpine war, and conquerors and conquered gave alternate cause for dissension. Scarce could this madness have been calmed by my vigilance, much less by a boy's rule... 'Twas then that Stilicho took my place..."

SERVING HONORIUS

Following the death of Theodosius, Honorius became emperor of the Western Roman Empire while his brother Arcadius was placed on the Eastern throne in Constantinople. As both were underage, Stilicho remained the caretaker for Honorius until he came of age. He would claim to have been given a similar role in regards to Arcadius, although no independent verification of this exists. Neither proved to powerfully assert themselves as leaders, and Stilicho came to be the de facto commander-in-chief of the Roman armies in the west while his rival Rufinus became the power behind the throne in the east. To strengthen his hold over the emperor, he gave Honorius his daughter Maria's hand in marriage in 398, and after her death, Thermantia's in 408. Both of these marriages did not produce any children. Stilicho used his military leadership as well as Honorius' youth and inexperience to consolidate his authority over the empire, though he acquired many rivals and enemies in the process, both in the West and East.

Balkans Campaign

His first brush with such court politics came in 395. After the Battle of Frigidus the Goths, under their new king Alaric, were returning to their allotted lands in Lower Moesia when they decided to raid the countryside. By doing so Alaric effectively broke his treaty with Rome. Unfortunately for the Romans, the armies of the Eastern Empire were occupied with Hunnic incursions in Asia Minor and Syria. Rufinus, Praetorian Prefect of the East, attempted to negotiate with Alaric in person. Officials in Constantinople suspected Rufinus was in league with the Goths. Stilicho led the army, which had been victorious at the Frigidus and was still assembled in Italy, into the Balkans to confront the Goths, eventually surrounding them somewhere in Thessaly. According to Claudian, Stilicho was in a position to destroy them, but was ordered by Arcadius to return the Eastern Empire's forces and leave Illyricum. Stilicho resented the orders, for he was in a position to defeat Alaric's Goths, but he obeyed them anyway. When the Eastern Empire's forces arrived at Constantinople, Arcadius and Rufinus rode out to meet them. At this meeting Rufinus was murdered by the troops. Many historians suspect the involvement of Stilicho in the assassination/murder of Rufinus.

In 396 Stilicho campaigned against the Franks and other Germanic tribes in Gaul. He used the campaign to boost the morale of the western army – which had suffered three consecutive defeats in the civil wars against Theodosius – and to recruit Germanic auxiliaries to bolster its depleted ranks. The next year, in 397, Stilicho defeated Alaric's forces in Macedonia, but Alaric himself escaped into the surrounding mountains. Edward Gibbon, drawing on Zosimus, criticizes Stilicho for being overconfident in victory and indulging in luxury and women, allowing Alaric to escape. Contemporary scholarship disagrees, and finds a variety of possible explanations, including an order from Arcadius directing him to evacuate the Eastern Empire, the unreliability of his mostly barbarian troops, the revolt of Gildo in Africa or the possibility that he simply was never as close to Alaric as Claudian suggests.

Later that year, Gildo, the comes et magister utriusque militiae per Africam (the commander of all troops in Africa), revolted. He declared his intention to place the African provinces, the critical source of Rome's grain supply, under the control of the Eastern Empire. Stilicho sent Mascezel, the brother of Gildo, into Africa with an army, which quickly suppressed the rebellion. However, upon his return to Italy, Mascezel was drowned under questionable circumstances, perhaps on the orders of a jealous Stilicho. The year 400 also saw Stilicho accorded the highest honour within the Roman state by being appointed consul.

The Gildonic War

The Gildonic War (Latin: Bellum Gildonicum) was a rebellion in the year 398 led by Comes Gildo against Roman emperor Honorius. The revolt was subdued by Stilicho, the magister militum of the Western Roman Empire.

Gildo was a Berber by birth, the son of the immensely rich and prestigious Moorish lord Nubel. Under the reign of Valentinian I, Nubel's death resulted in a succession dispute between his sons, and Gildo's brother Firmus emerged victorious, after assassinating his brother Zamma. But when the governor of Africa, the unpopular count Romanus, disputed Firmus' claim, the latter used his influence, and the effects of the public outrage at Romanus' maladministration, to raise the province into open revolt, and only the swift response of the Imperial court and the energetic conduct of the general Theodosius prevented the province from becoming an independent monarchy of Firmus. The tyrant was captured, and the rebellion suppressed (373–374 AD); but the province remained unhappy. Romanus, whose exactions and corruption had given rise to the disorder, was not prosecuted for his crimes, and the malversations in the government continued.

Several years later (386 AD), the son of emperor Theodosius I decided to pacify the province by appointing Firmus' brother Gildo, who had fought loyally and courageously for the Romans during his brother's rebellion, with the rank of military Count to restore justice in the province. However, he ruled the province as a bloodthirsty, cruel tyrant throughout the twelve years of his command (386–398 AD). This province was, after the change of Egypt province's breadbasket role to the Eastern Roman Empire, designated as the granary of Rome and Roman Italy. Gildo used Rome's dependence on this tribute to expand his authority, and the disorder in the Roman government after the death of Theodosius and the division of the Empire between his sons, Arcadius and Honorius, into separate spheres of east and west, contributed to secure Gildo's impunity, and provoked him at last into flagrant abuse of his power.

Gildo had failed to support Theodosius in the civil war of 394 against Eugenius, and consequently had awakened Theodosius' mistrust; the latter's death prevented retribution, but when the energetic general Stilicho had succeeded to the management of Honorius' affairs, Gildo could only avoid punishment by subordinating himself to the Eastern Empire, directed by the eunuch Eutropius. This constituted an act of treason against Honorius, who had officially received Africa as part of his portion. Stilicho, hoping to preempt the intervention of Eutropius, who might be expected to support Gildo's secession to the east, exploited the complaints of the inhabitants of Africa regarding Gildo's misrule to persuade the Senate to declare him "enemy of the State" and wrest Africa from him.

Stilicho sent the brother of Gildo, Mascezel, together with some 5,000 Gallic veterans, to Northwest Africa. Gibbon reports the units that formed the expeditionary force consisted of men from units whose names carried long histories of service to Rome:

> *These troops, who were exhorted to convince the world that they could subvert, as well as defend, the throne of an usurper, consisted of the Jovian, the Herculian, and the Augustan legions; of the Nervian auxiliaries; of the soldiers who displayed in their banners the symbol of a lion; and of the troops which were distinguished by the auspicious names of Fortunate and Invincible.*
>
> ***—Edward Gibbon, The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire***

The loyalist army was countered by a force of some 70,000, consisting of the Roman legions already present in Africa, complemented with a huge cavalry of mercenaries from Gaetulia and Ethiopia.

As Mascezel approached with offers of peace, he first encountered the standard bearer of one of the African legions. When he refused to yield, Mascezel struck him on the arm with his sword. As a result, the standard-bearer lowered the standard, which was incorrectly perceived by the troops as a sign of submission. All other standard-bearers of the frontline followed the example, and the disaffected cohorts turned against Gildo and began shouting the name of their new commander. The Berber mercenaries were amazed at the disloyalty of their Roman allies and took to a tumultuous flight.

The honour of an easy and almost bloodless victory fell to Mascezel, while Gildo tried to flee in a small boat, hoping to reach the friendly shores of the Eastern Roman Empire. However, unfavourable winds drove the vessel back to the harbour of Tabraca, where the inhabitants were eager to display their new loyalty by throwing Gildo in the dungeons. To avoid the revenge of his brother (Gildo had the two sons of Mascezel murdered), Gildo committed suicide by hanging.

Mascezel died shortly after his brother. On his triumphant return to the Roman court in Mediolanum, Stilicho received him with much ceremony and jealousy. He drowned when he, in the company of Stilicho, crossed a bridge and fell in the water, either by accident, or pushed on orders of Stilicho.

Stilicho also fought a war in Britain in this time period, likely in the year 398, dubbed Stilicho's Pictish War. The campaign against the Picts is highly disputed. The troops defending the British provinces probably defeated an invasion by the Picts without any support from Stilicho – who is never recorded to have left Italy in 398. Claudian refers to Stilicho providing Britannia with forts and a legion to protect it from incursions by Picts and Scots. However, a critical analysis of his panegyric suggests that things went badly.

Stilicho's Pictish War

Stilicho's Pictish War is a name given to a war between the forces of the Western Roman Empire led by Stilicho and the Picts in Britain around 398 AD. Little is known about the conflict. The only real source is the panegyric In Eutropium by Claudian . Another source is Gildas' sixth-century De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae. The war ended in a Roman victory.

In the panegyric Eutropium by Claudianus on Stilicho, this war is told. It mentions the Gildonic uprising in Africa that Stilicho had to deal with and that Britannia was suffering from attacks by the Saxons, Picts, and Scots. The praise ended with the verse: "defeated the Saxons, the ocean calmed down, the Picts broke, and Great Britain safe." Another poem by Claudianus refers to a possible expedition to Britannia by Stilicho in 396-398. In the Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae of the British monk Gildas, this conflict is called one of the three Pictic wars. Later historians such as Edward Gibbon have also written about this episode.

Britannia had a relatively quiet period after the campaign of Count Theodosius in 368. This period ended when the Picts attacked the northern border area of Britannia and made it unsafe with looting raids. At the same time, the eastern and southern coastal areas were harassed by Saxon invaders and invaded Scots in the east. The expedition army sent by Stilicho to put an end to these attacks probably consisted of the Gallic veterans who previously successfully acted against Gildon's African uprising. It is uncertain whether Stilicho himself led this expedition or ordered to do so. The outcome of the war was clear, after a series of skirmishes, the Romans defeated the Picts. The Saxons and Scots experienced the same fate. In 400, Stilicho seems to have had repairs carried out to the Wall of Hadrian with money collected during the African campaign. Archaeological evidence that this war has taken place is missing.

The War of Stilicho is the last great feat of war of the Romans in Britain. In 401 Stilicho was preparing for a new campaign against the Vandals and Alans north of the Alpine region. He moved his Gallic legion from Britannia to join The main force in Italy. The military presence of the Romans in Britain therefore receded and would create the circumstance that led to the uprising of the British garrison in 407 when Gaul was overrun by the Germans.

The Gothic War

In 401 Stilicho led the praesental army from Italy into Raetia and Noricum in response to an invasion by Vandals and Alans. Sensing an opportunity Alaric invaded Italy and lay siege to Mediolanum (Milan) where Honorius was residing. In 402 Stilicho returned to Italy and hastened forward with a selected vanguard in advance of his main body, breaking the siege of Mediolanum and rescuing the besieged emperor. One of his chieftains implored him to retreat from Italy, but Alaric refused. In a surprise attack on Easter Sunday in 402, Stilicho defeated Alaric at the Battle of Pollentia, capturing his camp and his wife. Alaric himself managed to escape with most of his men. This battle was the last victory celebrated in a triumphal march in Rome, which was saved for the time being. At Verona, Stilicho again bested Alaric, who managed to escape with a diminished force. A truce was made and Alaric went to Illyricum where he and his men were settled in the border provinces of Noricum and Pannonia (probably Pannonia Secunda).

The Siege of Asti

The siege of Asti was a siege in 402, laid by the Visigoths under their king Alaric I after the Visigothic invasion of Northern Italy.

Emperor Honorius fled the Imperial capital in Mediolanum upon the rapid advance of the Goths through northern Italy. His original intent of escaping to Arles was foiled by an advanced Gothic party which blocked his western march. Pursued by the invaders, the Emperor with his retinue fled instead to Asti, then named Hasta. The Goths placed Hasta under siege until March when General Stilicho, bringing reinforcements from the Rhine, forced them to lift the siege and retreat to a more convenient terrain in Pollentia, where they battled the Roman army.

The Battle of Pollentia

The Battle of Pollentia was fought on 6 April 402 between the Romans under Stilicho and the Visigoths under Alaric I, during the first Gothic invasion of Italy (401–403). The Romans were victorious, and forced Alaric to retreat, though he rallied to fight again in the next year in the Battle of Verona, where he was again defeated. After this, Alaric retreated from Italy, leaving the province in peace until his second invasion in 409, after Stilicho's death.

The Battle of Verona

The Battle of Verona was fought in June 402 by Alaric's Visigoths and a Roman force led by Stilicho. Alaric was defeated and forced to withdraw from Italy.

After securing from Arcadius (Honorius' brother and Emperor of the East) the title of *magister militum* (Commander in Chief of the Army) of Illyricum in 397, Alaric, King of the Visigoths, immediately began to plan for the invasion of the Western Empire, led by the Roman general of barbarian origin Stilicho, *Magister militum* of the West.

Alaric invaded Italy in late 401, crossing the Alps and the River Adige, and Stilicho dashed north to bring reinforcements from Gaul for the defence of the emperor's court at Mediolanum (modern Milan). By the time the *Magister militum* returned he found that Alaric had taken Mediolanum, while Honorius was chased into refuge at Hasta. But before the place could be besieged and the Emperor captured Stilicho finally arrived on the scene, heavily reinforced by barbarians from Germany; Alaric retreated westwards, setting up his camp near Pollentia. Stilicho pursued, and the two armies met at the battle of Pollentia in early April 402, where Alaric was probably badly beaten.

By all accounts, however, the Gothic king emerged from the battle with his cavalry arm intact, and marched south intending to take Rome, undefended while Honorius was celebrating Stilicho's victory. Stilicho followed and intercepted him north of the capital; but instead of risking another battle, he offered Alaric a substantial subsidy in return for the prompt departure of the Goths from Italy. Alaric's chieftains and common soldiers eagerly grasped at so easy a prospect of safety and riches, and Alaric, whose prestige was weakened by defeat, was forced to reluctantly comply, in spite of his hopes of capturing the capital.

In obedience to the treaty Alaric led his army north, and crossed the Po into Gallia Transpadne, closely shadowed by a cautious Stilicho. Once across the river, however, Alaric began plotting a new invasion of the Western Empire, this time across the Rhine into Gaul. Stilicho, kept informed of Alaric's plans and movements by spies within the Gothic camp, considered himself absolved of the treaty, and laid an ambush for the Goths in the mountain passes from Gaul into Rhaetia, which lay on Alaric's proposed route.

The Goths found themselves trapped in the mountain valleys near Verona, surrounded on all sides by Stilicho's forces. In the battle that ensued, named after the neighbouring city, Alaric's army suffered heavy casualties, though the king himself managed to break through the Roman lines to erect his standard on an adjacent hill, followed by his bravest soldiers. According to Stilicho's critics, Alaric with his reduced army were in sufficiently bad condition at this point as to have easily been exterminated, forever terminating a serious threat to the Roman Empires of East and West. In any case, Alaric was able to escape and straggle over the Alps into Illyricum with the sorry remains of his once-splendid army. For the moment, the Gothic king was thoroughly chastened.
After suffering this reverse, Alaric quickly came to terms with Stilicho's administration, by which Alaric was to return to Honorius' allegiance and aid the western emperor in recovering territory from Arcadius' ministers, who had supposedly usurped these provinces from Stilicho's control. In return, Alaric would receive a subsidy and a military command.

Although the series of Stilicho's victories made a profound impression on the Roman people, which gave itself over to rejoicings and celebrations, especially in the capital, Alaric's ambitions were far from checked, and new threats would soon arise to further damage the unity and strength of the Empire. Stilicho's triumph over Alaric in 402 was followed by a series of disasters which culminated in the *Magister militum'*s disgrace and death in 408. The invasion of Radagaisus at the head of a large Germanic army (405-6), though repelled by Stilicho, was redirected in the next years on Gaul, which was overrun and permanently lost to the Empire. Stilicho was unable to prevent the usurpation of Constantine III in the next year, who conciliated the Germans and thus took control of Britain, Gaul, and Spain. In the year afterward, Stilicho himself fell to the intrigues of Olympius, his rival in the court of Honorius, and was executed at the latter's misguided orders.

Once Stilicho was removed from the scene, the conquest of Rome by Alaric was an easy task. Despite having failed to execute his part of the deal concluded with Stilicho in 403, Alaric crossed the Alps in 409 demanding his promised money and a military position, in what was to all intents and purposes an invasion of Italy. Although Honorius lacked the resources to repel him, he repeatedly refused negotiation, relying on the strong defences of Ravenna, his capital, to preserve the court from the Goths, but leaving Rome undefended. This brought about the war which ended with the siege and Sack of Rome by Alaric in 410.

Campaign in North Italy

In 405 Radagaisus, the king of one of the Gothic tribes north of the Danube, led a combined force of Goths, Alans, Sueves, and Vandals across the Danube and the Alps and into Italy. This disrupted Stilicho's plans to re-take Illyricum from the Eastern Empire with the help of Alaric. Stilicho, scraping together a force of c. 20,000 men (thirty numeri of Roman troops with supporting units of federates of Alans and Huns) through a variety of desperate methods, including efforts to enroll slaves in the army in exchange for their freedom, at Ticinum (Pavia) led this force at the beginning of the campaigning season in 406 against Radagaisus. Fortunately for Stilicho, Radagaisus had split his forces into three divisions; two were pillaging the Italian countryside while the largest contingent – under Radagaisus himself – was laying siege to Florentia.

Stilicho marched his entire army against Radagaisus at Florentia, managed to surprise him and captured almost his entire force. Stilicho executed Radagaisus and enrolled 12,000 of his warriors in his army. The rest were sold off as slaves.

In late 406, Stilicho demanded the return of the eastern half of Illyricum (which had been transferred to the administrative control of Constantinople by Theodosius), threatening war if the Eastern Roman Empire resisted. The exact reasons for this are unclear, but there are several theories: 1) Stilicho wanted Illyricum as a recruiting ground for his army (recruiting troops in the western provinces proved difficult because most able bodied men were employed by the western elite which he could not afford to antagonize). 2) Stilicho feared that Italy could be invaded from Illyricum if he did not control the Diocese himself (directly or indirectly through Alaric). 3) Stilicho planned to neutralize Alaric as a threat by employing him and his battle-hardened troops in the Western Empire's defences and made him comes et magister militum per Illyricum (Stilicho and Alaric would take Illyricum from the Eastern Empire, Alaric would defend Illyricum, leaving Stilicho free to concentrate on the north). A combination of all three is also a possibility.

War of Radagaisus

The War of Radagaisus was a military conflict in northern Italy in the period 405–406. This conflict was caused by the invasion of Radagaisus in 405. He invaded the Western Roman Empire with a huge population shortly after the empire had ended a war with the Visigoths. Due to the size of Radagaisus' army, it required a tremendous effort by the Romans to avert this danger. Commander-in-chief Stilicho was closely involved in the preparations that were made and personally directed the army's operations.

At the end of the fourth century, the Huns, a nomadic people from Central Asia, arrived in Europe. From 395, when they stayed north of the Black Sea, they attacked the Eastern Roman Empire in waves, where they caused enormous destruction. Their arrival disrupted the populations already established in the region. Out of fear, various peoples left their habitats and chased other peoples. This movement is probably the origin of the migration of the Goths, who had bad experiences with the Huns led by Uldin). Radagaisus was a Gothic monarch who led his people from the Great Hungarian Plain to Italy. Despite what Zosimus says about this, most other sources describe Radagaisus' followers as Goths, and specify that he was their king. A group of Alans and Vandals marched together with the Goths.

Another explanation for Radagaisus' arrival is that the Western government's neglect of the threat posed by the gathered peoples on its borders caused a crisis that led Radagaisus to invade the empire in the hope of gaining new land and concessions from the government obtain.

When Radagaisus appeared at the border of the Western Roman Empire in 405, he had a large crowd with him. According to Zosimus, Radagaisus' people consisted of 400,000 people, Orosius mentions a number of 200,000. Modern historians suggest that his force probably numbered about 20,000 warriors. These warriors were accompanied by their families, meaning the total size of Radagaisus' group may have approached 100,000. They crossed the Danube River and followed a route through western Pannonia to the northern Alpine provinces and descended to Italy via the Brenner Pass. This is supported by archaeological finds of coin jars, buried by residents who apparently knew of Radagaisus' arrival. Around this time, Flavia Solva was burned and largely abandoned and Aguntum was destroyed by fire. An unspecified number of refugees fled before his army as it marched across the Alps.

Radagaisus encountered no significant resistance from the Roman army along the way. The imperial court had recently moved to Ravenna, where Stilicho had stationed the bulk of his Palatini field armies nearby, not only to guarantee the court's protection but also to oversee the western Illyrian provinces where Alaric stayed after his withdrawal from the war of 402. Moreover, the passages through the Alps were not or hardly defended, because the Alpine garrisons had been stripped by previous wars, and the mountain range was never fully manned after 395.

The army of Radagaisus was of such a size that Stilicho did not dare to attack it with his field army. Radagaisus' army ravaged Italy from the Alps to Tuscany for more than half a year before Stilicho amassed a force large enough to deal with the barbarian invaders. The fact that some towns were taken by storm, although unspecified but most likely all walled, was ominous enough in itself.

Stilicho brought a total of thirty Numerus of the Roman army into position. Together with auxiliary troops from the Alans and Huns, he managed to create a force of between 15,000 and 20,000 men, but possibly even smaller. Given the magnitude of the danger, it is reasonable to assume that he also mobilized troops stationed in Gaul, as he had done earlier during Alaric's invasion of Italy. However, the deployment of this army was continually postponed, because in April 406, soldiers were still recruited and even slaves were recruited into the army on the promise of freedom and a reward of two solidi. Eventually, Uldin's Hunnish auxiliaries arrived in Italy, strengthening Stilicho's army.

In August, Stilicho finally dared to challenge Radagaisus in the field when an excellent opportunity presented itself. Radagaisus had divided his army into three, under different leaders. Unlike the Imperial Army, he did not have the logistics to feed such a huge following in enemy territory, the elements of his army had to forage for themselves.

Stilicho managed to make contact with one of those groups and persuade them to defect. That group was led by the Goth Sarus. In exchange for a ransom, he and his warriors defected to the Roman side. Peter Heather suggests that behind Stilicho's acquisition of 12,000 of Radagaisus' best warriors "was a significant diplomatic coup, which drastically reduced Radagaisus' army and thus his chances of defeating Stilicho."

According to Heather, the third group consisted of the Alans and Vandals who had joined Radagaisus at the start of the raid. When Uldin's auxiliary troops arrive, their first task is to attack this group, with which Stilicho kept his Roman troops in reserve before allowing them to participate in the battle. About the groups of Alans and Vandals we are briefly informed by Orosius who mentions a massacre of the Alans by the Huns. Orosius' description is confirmed by Zosimus as well as by the Gallic Chronicler of 452. This event concerns a description of Stilicho's Huns slaughtering the third group of Radagaisus' army. Stilicho could not prioritize tracking down fleeing bands because he had to quickly march further south to subdue Sarus' host and defeat Radagaisus' main force.

The most plausible reconstruction is that the fleeing barbarians were actually a remnant of Radagaisus' third force, composed mainly of Vandals and Alans, who fled from northern Italy to Raetia across the Alps.

From Pavia, Stilicho's main force marches against Radagaisus, who is near the city of Florence, which is besieged by his Gothic army. In the hills of the Apennines near Fiesole, Stilicho's army meets Uldin's army and Sarus' Gothic army. Together they move on to Florence. Stilicho's army is now many times larger than Radagaisus's and manages to encircle the enemy army. The Romans avoided direct confrontation as much as possible and kept the encirclement closed. Famine soon breaks out among the besieged. The barbarians repeatedly make attempts to break out, always without success and when fighting takes place it is the Goths of Sarus' defected army who are deployed by Stilicho against Radagaisus' forces. According to Orosius, Sarus played a leading role in the battle. Ultimately, Radagaisus sees the hopelessness of his situation and surrenders. He capitulated on August 23. Although he has been promised fair terms, possibly concluding an alliance with the Romans, Stilicho immediately has him beheaded.

The victory over Radagaisus is welcomed with great joy in Rome. In Stilicho's honor, a triumphal arch and monument are erected in the Forum to celebrate the victory and "Stilicho's exceptional love for the Roman people".

The victory in Florence can be regarded as the counterexample to the Roman defeat at Adrianople (378). It shows what the late Roman army was still capable of. Through good logistics, strategy and deft diplomacy, it managed to defeat a numerically superior opponent composed of different ethnicities. Stilicho achieved the greatest victory of his career with his victory in the War of Radagaisus.

The victory also had a downside. In order to defeat Radagaisus, Stilico had to clear part of the Rhine borders of his troops. At the end of December 405 or 406 AD there was a very severe winter, which caused the water in the Rhine to freeze over and a large contingent of Vandals, Alans and Suevi to cross and invade the provinces of Gaul (Rhine crossing). This invasion led to the army in Britannia revolting and crossing over to the continent under usurper Constantine III, after which the provinces of Gaul and Spain fell out of Emperor Honorius' power. Stilicho was accused by several of his competitors at the imperial court of inciting the Vandals, Alans, and Suevi to invade Gaul in order to take advantage of the weakening of the empire and claim the throne for himself. These allegations ultimately lead to Stilicho's downfall in 408.

DOWNFALL

In order to protect Italy from invasions by Alaric (401–402) and Radagaisus (405–406), Stilicho had seriously depleted the Roman forces defending the Rhine frontier. He left it defended "only by the faith of the Germans and the ancient terror of the Roman name", as Gibbon put it. In 406 a coalition of Vandals, Alans, and Suevi (Quadians, Marcomanni, and Alemanni) from central Europe arrived at the Rhine frontier. The Franks, Rome's allies on the northern Rhine, tried to stop the Vandals from entering the Empire and fought them on the far bank of the Rhine. The Vandals defeated the Franks with the help of the Alans, but lost their king Godigisel. On 31 December 406, the coalition crossed the poorly defended Rhine frontier. These new migrants proceeded to devastate the provinces of Gaul, as well as triggering military revolts there and in Britannia. Stilicho's reputation would never recover from this disaster.

The destruction that occurred in Gaul and the lack of an effective response from the court in Ravenna lent support to the rebellion of Constantine III in Britain, which Stilicho proved unable to quash. As Constantine moved his forces into Gaul, Stilicho sent his subordinate Sarus to oppose him. Sarus had some initial success, winning a major victory and killing both of Constantine's magistri militum, but a relief force drove him back and saved the rebellion. Sarus withdrew and Stilicho decided to seal off the Alps to prevent Constantine from threatening Italy.

Meanwhile, Constantine's rebellion having interrupted the negotiations between Alaric and Stilicho for the joint attack on Illyria, Alaric demanded the payment he was owed, threatening to attack Italy again if he did not receive a large amount of gold. The senate, "inspired by the courage, rather than the wisdom, of their predecessors", as Gibbon put it, favored war with Alaric until Stilicho persuaded them to give into Alaric's demands. They were angry at Stilicho for this, and one of the most outspoken of them, Lampadius, said "Non est ista pax, sed pactio servitutis (This is not peace, but a pact of servitude)."

Stilicho's unsuccessful attempts to deal with Constantine, and rumors that he had earlier planned the assassination of Rufinus and that he planned to place his son on the throne following the death of emperor Arcadius (1 May 408), caused a revolt. The Roman army at Ticinum mutinied on August 13, 408, killing at least seven senior imperial officers (Zosimus 5.32). John Matthews observed that the following events "have every appearance of a thoroughly co-ordinated coup d'état organized by Stilicho's political opponents". Stilicho retired to Ravenna, where he was taken into captivity. Stilicho did not resist and was executed on August 22, 408, as was his son, Eucherius, shortly afterwards.

AFTERMATH

In the disturbances which followed, the wives and children of barbarian foederati throughout Italy were slain by the local Romans. The natural consequence was that these men (estimates describe their numbers as perhaps 30,000 strong) flocked to the protection of Alaric, clamoring to be led against their enemies. The Visigothic warlord accordingly crossed the Julian Alps and began a campaign through the heart of Italy. By September 408, the barbarians stood before the walls of Rome.

Without a strong general like Stilicho, Honorius could do little to break the siege, and adopted a passive strategy trying to wait out Alaric, hoping to regather his forces to defeat the Visigoths in the meantime. What followed was two years of political and military manoeuvering, Alaric, king of the Goths, attempting to secure a permanent peace treaty and rights to settle within Roman territory.

He besieged Rome three times without attacking while the Roman army of Italy watched helplessly, but only after a fourth failed attempt at a deal was Alaric's siege a success. After months under siege the people of Rome were dying of hunger and some were resorting to cannibalism. Then, the Gothic army broke through the gates and sacked the city in August of 410. Many historians argue that the removal of Stilicho was the main catalyst leading to this monumental event, the first barbarian capture of Rome in nearly eight centuries and a part of the fall of the Western Roman Empire.